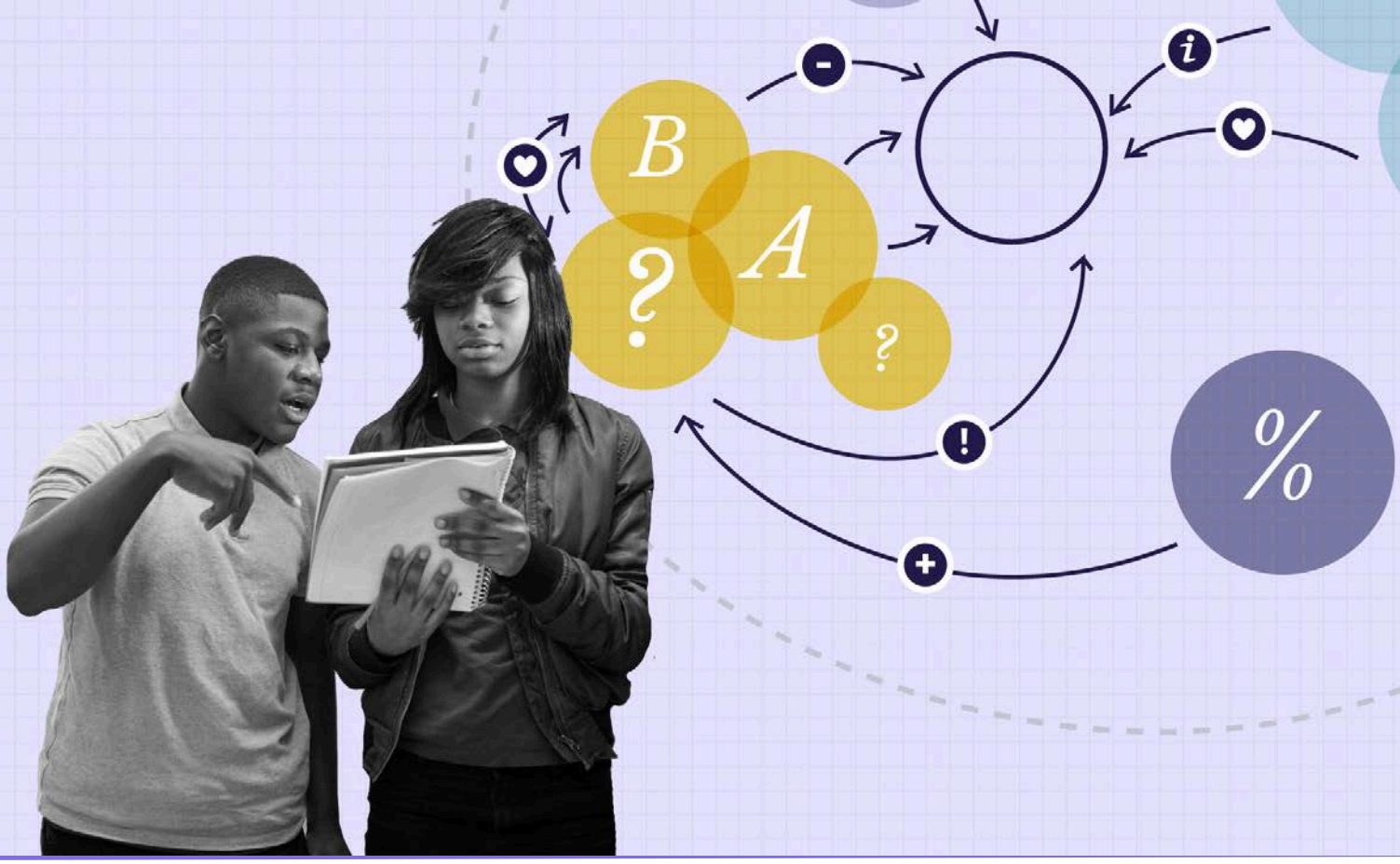

#RethinkingGrading

Three Significant Grading Shifts

reDesign

PROJECT PARTNERS

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RENNIE CENTER EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

Introduction

Challenges in Grading and Reform

For more than a decade—and most notably during and after the pandemic—educators, parents, students, and researchers have noted a number of problems with traditional forms of grading, including inequity, inaccuracy, and opacity. Traditional grades have all too often seemed unfair, uninformative, and unmotivating to many learners in a wide-range of schools and education settings across the country (Feldman, 2023; Hough, 2023). To address these problems with traditional grading, education communities at all levels, including states, districts, schools, and individual teachers, have been guided by the work of researchers and practitioners as they rethink grading. Three of the main shifts being considered in relation to grading reform are: proficiency-based grading (standards-based grading and competency-based grading); minimum grading (no-zeroes given); and increased opportunities to reflect on and revise learning (feedback, revision, retakes). Each of these three shifts is summarized here.

Shift One

Proficiency-based grading

Shifting from **numeric and alpha scales** to **standards-based** and **competency-based grading**

Most traditional forms of grading are based on numeric (0-100) or alpha (a-f) scales, whereas standards-based and competency-based grading are aligned to proficiencies, in the form of learning outcomes and/or progressions. Through their emphasis on proficiencies, standards-based grading and competency-based grading seek to make grading into a more accurate representation of what students know and can do than traditional grading methods, which do not often articulate what a grade actually means in relation to knowledge and skill development.

Standards-based grading

Standards-based grading systems are usually based on **five related principles**: **1)** a grade should represent the extent to which a learner has demonstrated knowledge of a clearly defined set of standards; **2)** performance in relation to the standards should be based on a scale of four or five levels rather than on an accumulation of points, such as those used in a more traditional percentage system; **3)** factors not directly related to demonstrating knowledge of standards – such as lateness, attendance, effort—should not affect a learner's grade; **4)** a grade should reflect what a learner has learned, not what they already knew, so a learner's final demonstration of understanding on a summative assessment should be considered more important than a simple averaging of their performance on tests and assignments over the course of a year or semester; **5)** formative assessments, homework, and other sorts of practice assignments should be used for feedback– not to determine a learner's final grade–because they represent a learner's developing understanding, not their final understanding as represented on a summative assessment or piece of work ((Fisher et al., 2011; Guskey et al., 2011; Guskey, 2020; Huey et al., 2022; Scarlett, 2018). Of course, not all standards-based grading systems abide by all five of these related principles, yet most include some combination of some of these principles.

Competency-based grading

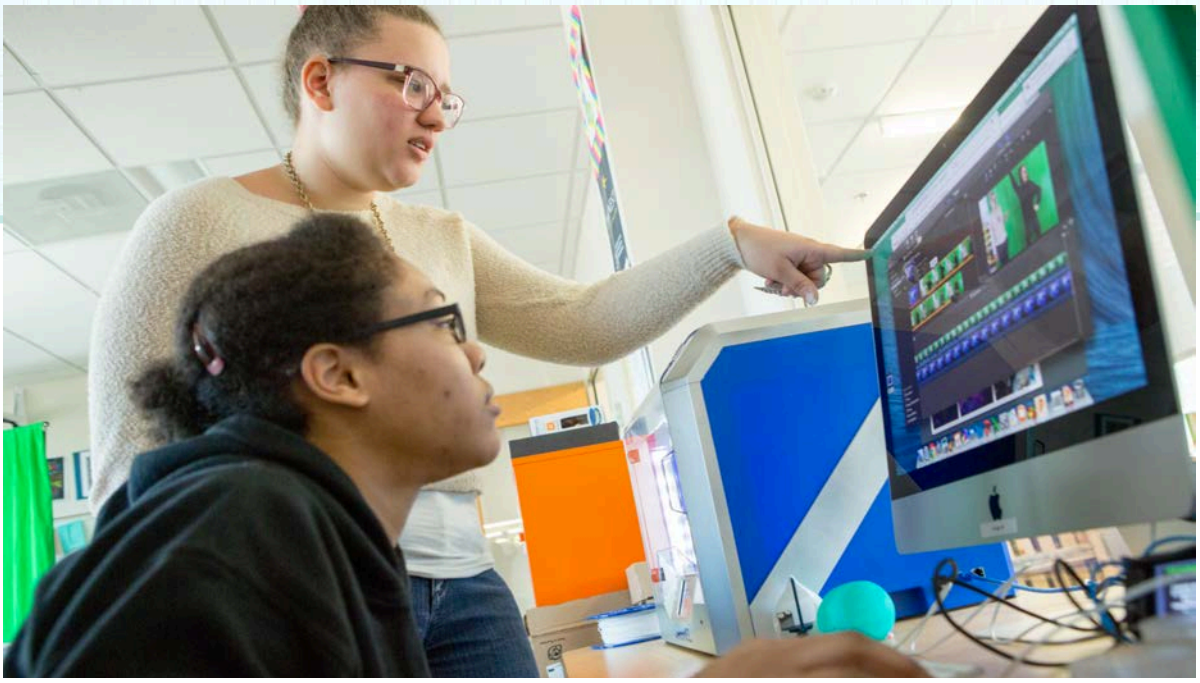
Competencies have a larger grain size than standards (Evans, 2019) (Schaef, n.d). Competencies usually define a set of important transferable capabilities (reasoning quantitatively, designing solutions, engaging in inquiry), which are expressed in the form of progressions and assessed through performance assessments, in the form of compelling and intellectually challenging tasks, such as those designed by Stanford University's **SCALE** project (McClennen and Miles, 2023; Schaef, 2021). Competency-based grading ascribes to many of the same five principles that underlie standards-based grading, but with significantly more emphasis on learning as progressive growth, and more concern with how one grows, learns, and improves than with how one simply proves knowledge of a single, specific learning outcome (Gagnon, 2022). The NYC Competency Collaborative's page on **competency-based grading** articulates particularly well the ways competency-based grading, unlike standards-based grading, shifts away from evidence of completion/compliance towards learning over time, which can be better mapped and articulated with a competency progression than a static standard. Additionally, the page demonstrates competency-based grading's concern with equity and well-being by incorporating the affective, social, emotional, motivational aspects of grading that are not always so carefully articulated in standards-based grading approaches.

Often conflated–yet different philosophically in many significant ways—standards-based grading and competency-based grading are similar in their foregrounding of proficiencies and their movement away from often unmeaningful and seemingly arbitrary forms of grading. Both embrace the articulation of clear learning outcomes, the foregrounding of a growth mindset, and the value of learning from opportunities to make mistakes and challenge oneself, and it is just these far-reaching values from which much of the recent grading reform movement has sprung.

Shift Two

Minimum Grading

Shifting from **zero** to **no zero policies**



Minimum grading, unlike standards-based grading and competency-based grading, discussed above, is not so much a philosophy or system of grading, as an attempt to fix a problem with grading systems based on a 100-point scale, in which there is no floor or lowest minimum grade. Minimum grading articulates a floor–or lowest "minimum grade"--usually 50%, as opposed to zero in the more traditional 100-point grading scale. This means that in a minimum grading system, with a floor of 50%, 10 points separate each of the letter grades, A to F, and the same degree of improvement, numerically, is needed to go from F to D as from B to A (Feldman, 2023).

Proponents of minimum grading offer a range of reasons for making this change from traditional grading approaches, which include the more mathematically accurate value assigned to failure with minimum grading, the greater capacity of students to "recover" their overall average grade in a class after doing poorly on one or more assignments or assessments, and the extent to which zeros demoralize and demotivate students.

Some educators worry that minimum grading will lead to widespread social promotion and grade inflation, but a seven-year study by two University Massachusetts researchers of 343,000 grades assigned to nearly 11,000 students suggested this is not the case (Carifio and Carey, 2013; Carifio and Carey, 2015; Feldman, 2023) . They state that "Any claims that minimum grading was leading to large numbers of students passing courses they would otherwise be failing were clearly not true" (Carifio and Carey, 2013).

Minimum grading, unlike standards-based grading and competency-based grading, is not proficiency-aligned, and is essentially a strategy for addressing a single significant problem inherent in numeric grading systems. Yet the intention to make grading more accurate, transparent, equitable, and motivating lies at the heart of all these shifts, and, in many schools and districts where grading practices are complex, fragmented, and connected in layered ways, efforts to reform grading practices combine minimum grading and more proficiency-based forms of grading, like standards-based and competency-based approaches.

Shift Three

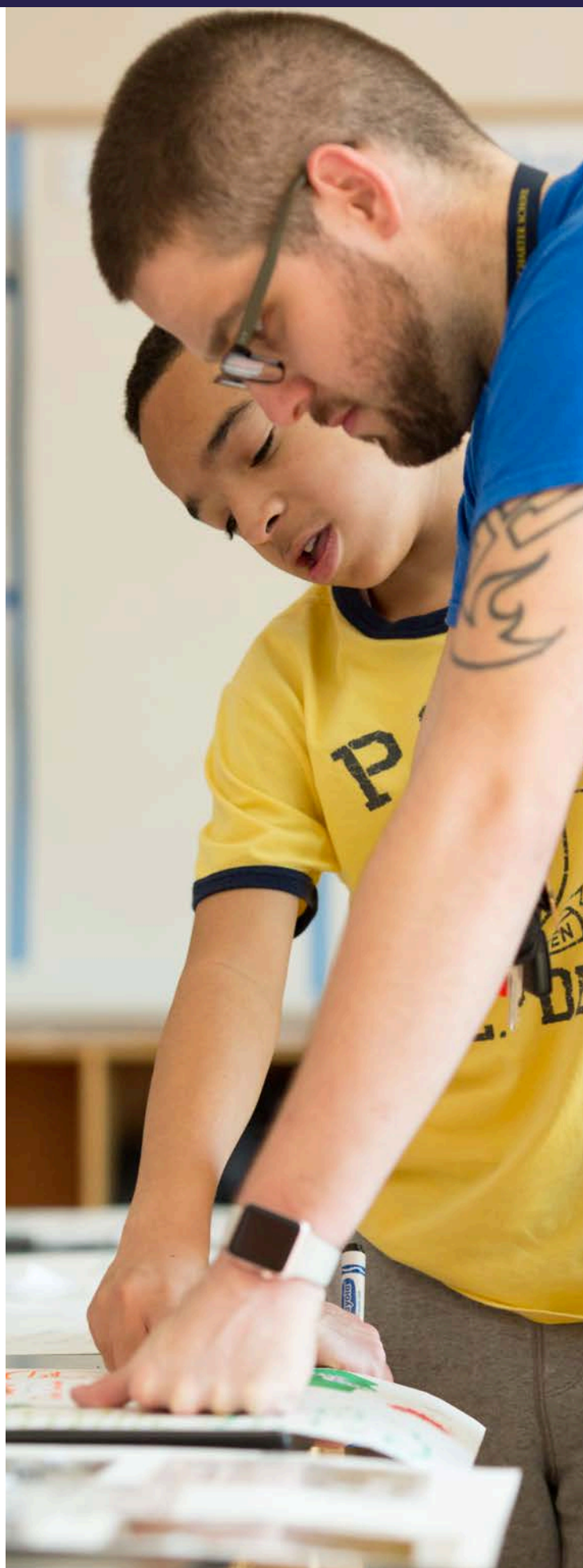
Timely and Informative Opportunities To Reflect On And Revise Learning

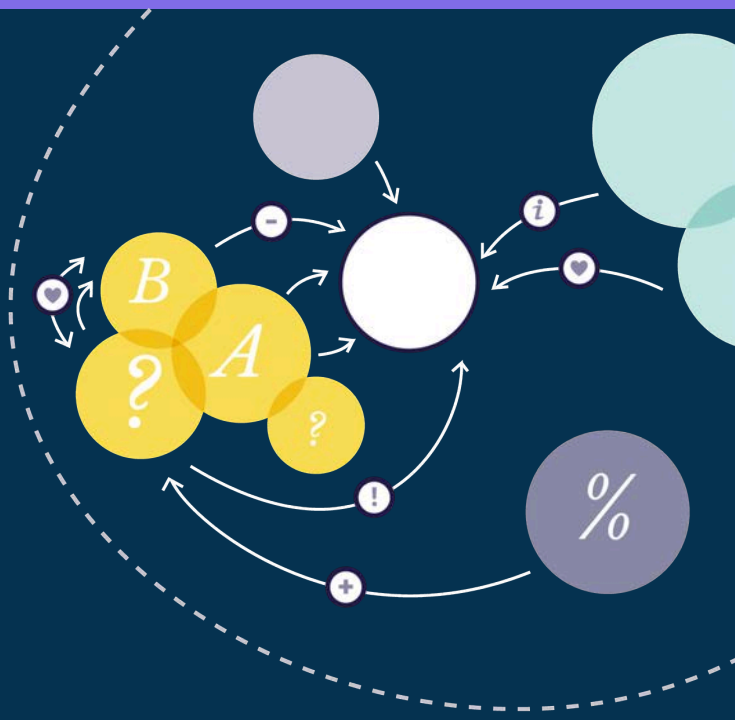
Shifting from **few opportunities for feedback, revision, and retakes** to **more frequent and purposeful opportunities** for all three

Inherent in the grading shifts reviewed so far—standards-based and competency-based grading, and minimum grading—is a recognition that learning entails making mistakes, trying new approaches, and challenging oneself to improve at something new or different from what one has known: in their own way each of the grading shifts we have reviewed so far makes more room for these kinds of experiential growth than traditional grading. So, it is not surprising that grading reform has also focused on how learners can better reflect on and revise their learning through more frequent and purposeful opportunities for feedback, revision, and retakes (Feldman, 2023; Guskey, 2023; Helton, et al.,2000; Percell, 2017)

Cycles of specific and actionable feedback–related to progress towards learning outcomes–has been a hallmark of proficiency-based approaches to grading. Yet, even schools and classes not working with standards or competencies have found the addition of timely, focused feedback to be a productive way to help students improve their learning, and ultimately their grades, particularly as they progress from formative assessments and tasks on which they get feedback to summative or performance assessments in which they will be required to show what they learned from the feedback they got on those earlier tasks.

Opportunities to revise work or retake an assessment have a similar capacity to boost learning and improve grades as they offer the chance to reflect, revise, rethink, and recreate, all of which are lifelong metacognitive skills, useful in school, life, and work. Figuring out the logistics and the parameters of revision and retake opportunities has, however, proved challenging, though, to many schools and educators attempting to balance perceived needs for fairness, accountability, and the fostering of responsibility in learners with a recognition of the value of a growth mindset, greater metacognitive skills, and enhanced learning inherent in well-managed revision and retake opportunities - not to mention the motivational worth of such activities and the ways in which they can promote a sense of hope, agency, and self-efficacy (Covington, 2019; Ryan, et al., 2016; Schunk and Mullen, 2012).





Implementing Grading Shifts: Challenges and Approaches

All of three of the shifts we have looked at—proficiency-based grading (standards-based grading, competency-based grading), minimum grading, and greater opportunities to reflect on and revise learning—entail significant change to traditional grading practices, and therefore are not necessarily easy to implement quickly or without some degree of uncertainty. Yet, many schools and districts across the country, have begun this work at their own pace and in their own ways, choosing to make small changes at the classroom level, with adjustments to revision and retake policies, for example, or more boldly at the district or school level, with changes to the structure of report cards and transcripts. There is not one clear path or prescription for considering, launching, and supporting shifts in grading systems, but with whatever changes are made, it is worth considering not only what problem any given change is attempting to address, but also what powerful and generative kinds of learning and teaching that change will enable to emerge.

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